

Acquisition Chief Discusses Transformation

CHUCK PAONE

Hanscom Air Force Base, Mass. (AFPN)—Communication and creativity are the key to transforming the defense acquisition process, the Air Force's top acquisition official said during a visit here Dec. 3.

The status quo is unacceptable, said Dr. Marvin Sambur, Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition, because acquisition cycle times—the time it takes to go from concept development to initial operational capability—are much too long.

“On average, Air Force programs' cycle times run about 10 years, and that's only the average; some programs take up to 25 years to get to the field,” he said.

The F/A-22 Raptor, which was conceived in 1981 and will not achieve initial operational capability until 2005 or 2006, is an example, he said. He contrasted this to the automobile industry, which has cut its cycle times to just a couple of years.

Besides the basic problem of not getting the capability to operators quickly enough, too many other problems are created when programs get stretched out, Sambur said. For one thing, it becomes very hard to keep up with technological changes.

“When it takes so long, it just can't be state-of-the-art,” he said.

There are also political implications.

“When leadership changes several times during the time it takes to field a system, the program gets opened up to increased scrutiny, and it gets threatened,” he said. This often leads to more problems for the program, further lengthening the schedule, and causing more budget overruns.

This negative cycle can then cause problems for other “healthy” programs, from which funds are often siphoned to cover the shortfalls, he said.

While there are many tools program managers can use to help avoid or at least reduce these problems, there is one thing that is essential in every case.

“Collaboration is the answer,” Sambur said, stressing that constant communication among all the parties involved in a program is what ultimately makes the difference between successful and problem-plagued programs.

“Have you ever noticed how much faster we're able to deliver things when we're at war, how we're able to deliver in months what might otherwise take us 10 years?” Sambur asked. “What do you think the difference is? It's that everyone's talking to one another all the time.”

Reducing burdensome regulations and affording managers greater autonomy are crucial in improving the acquisition process, Sambur said.

Leaders have to make sure creative program managers are not unnecessarily penalized for taking chances that ultimately do not work, and reward people for taking chances that do pay off.

“You've got to let program managers manage,” he said.

“Command, control and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance integration is perhaps the most significant of all [Department of Defense] transformation goals,” Sambur said. “It's absolutely paramount.”

This is true not only Air Force-wide but also across the Services, he said.

Editor's Note: This information is in the public domain at <http://www.af.mil/news>.